

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 206 215

HE 014 193

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 TITLE Educational Psychology in Action: Learning Skills Training with Health Sciences Students.
 PUB DATE [81]
 NOTE 7p.
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS Academic Achievement: *Allied Health Occupations Education: Grade Point Average: *Health Education: Higher Education: *High Risk Students: State Universities: Study Skills: Supplementary Education: *Tutorial Programs: Tutoring

ABSTRACT

The Learning Assistance Program (LAP) at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center was designed to create an inter-school, inter-program network of students and faculty. The aim is to promote a Health Sciences Center-wide approach to help high risk students negotiate high risk courses and to maximize the learning potential of all students through the proper teaching and reinforcement of student academic management skills. LAP fosters an attitude of prevention among students, identifying the need for help before academic problems reach the critical state. Some program innovations include hiring a fourth year medical student and a third year dental student to act as adult peer supervisors in LAP, organizing half-day orientation seminars on Saturday, implementing supplemental course instruction and special review classes beyond the formal instruction, and teaching learning skills as part of the professional curriculum. Measuring the efficacy of learning skills intervention is planned and will include pre- and post-test designs related to grade improvement. (CC)

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Abstract

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"Educational Psychology in Action:

Learning Skills Training with Health Sciences Students "

Introduction

The University of Colorado Health Sciences Center is a vital institution of higher learning devoted not only to patient care and research, but to teaching as well. It is within the content of high quality instruction that a systematic plan is now under way to influence how students can best take advantage of that instruction by strengthening those academic skills needed to survive in a very intense sciences environment. The Learning Assistance Program [LAP], sponsored by the Office of Minority Student Affairs, is attempting to influence student learning through two ways: 1) by working with faculty in the three Schools [Medicine, Dentistry, and Nursing] in identifying student helpers who are willing to work with other health sciences students across Schools who are experiencing academic difficulties, and, 2) by cultivating with that same faculty the attitude that even the best of students have learning skills difficulties [defined as study management, auxillary management (note-taking, listening skills, standardized examination tech-

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niques), and personal management] at some time in their tenure at this institution. This latter stance is unique because health sciences program faculty historically do not encourage a systematic approach to solving learning skills problems, and handle academic content difficulties through the use of departmental tutors.

The Program

Upon arrival at the Health Sciences Center, this author implemented the Learning Assistance Program based on the author's work in other academic environments and the literature (Maxwell, 1979). However, the combination of professional programs in medicine, dentistry, and nursing, and the specialities in child health, dental hygiene, medical technology, physical therapy, health administration, and the science graduate programs, posed a remarkable array of separate yet interdisciplinary training groups. It is with this in mind the program goals were formulated.

Philosophy: The goals of the Learning Assistance Program are four in nature: 1) to create an inter-school, inter-program network of students and faculty who will promote a Health Sciences Center-wide approach, i.e. a comprehensive Learning Assistance Program, 2) to help

high risk students negotiate high risk courses, 3) to maximize the learning potential of all students through the proper teaching and reinforcement of student academic management skills, and 4) to foster among students an attitude of prevention; identifying the need for help before academic problems reach the critical stage.

Key Aspects of the Program:

The author set out to revise the traditional tutorial program in order to operate orientation sessions for those tutors (renamed Learning Assistants) who would be working individually or with groups of students in an academic content area. Orientation programs are not new, but working with adult health sciences students in this regard does presuppose a level of maturity that may not be found in undergraduate peer helpers. This presents challenges in monitoring the helping relationship between assistants and the helper, without the supervisor becoming unduly intrusive in that relationship.

Unlike in other academic settings where failed courses may be taken over often in the next semester, course work in the health sciences setting is limited by time and selection. It is in this frame that the Learning Assistance Program emphasizes a rapid deployment sys-

tem . . . troubleshooting with faculty and students immediately on a one-to-one personal basis. The closeness (in proximity) of students and faculty and the consequences of academic failure demand such interactions.

Some program innovations include:

- 1) The hiring of a fourth year medical student and a third year dental student to act as adult peer supervisors in the Learning Assistance Program. With the author (whose title is that of Support Services Coordinator), these supervisors can also interact with faculty in securing assistance for students who need it. This is done within strict confidentiality guidelines imposed by the Coordinator.
- 2) The running of half-day orientation seminars on Saturdays due to the severe time restraints in the academic week.
- 3) The near future implementation of Supplemental Course Instruction (SCI) which will be designed to have paid full-time academic workers, knowledgeable in a science content area, sit in on formal lectures, and operate special review classes above formal instruction times. The uniqueness of this approach is that a learning skills program is attempting to become an integral part of the professional curriculum rather than an appendage. To the author's knowledge, few health sci-

ences settings have tried this approach.

Outcomes: The author plans to use a variety of techniques including pre- and post-test designs for measuring the efficacy of learning skills intervention, especially as related to grade improvement. Experimental and evaluative studies in this area are often inadequate (Clymer, 1978), and instructional theory is now giving clues as to what should be measured (Shuell, 1980). It is hoped that psychologists in similar work settings and/or who have a need to develop or refine intervention models will share this knowledge among themselves.

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